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COMMENTARY

The damage control outlook in Central America

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Sandinista chieftain Daniel Ortega and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev may have seriously miscalculated the mood of the U.S. Congress when the Democratic majority in the House last week defeated President Reagan's proposed renewal of American assistance for Nicaraguan guerrillas.

A number of moderate Democrats are having second thoughts about being held responsible before the electorate for what may happen next in Central America. Mr. Ortega only intensified their concern by dramatizing his dependence on Moscow with his hurried trip in search of \$200 million in additional Russian aid.

Adding insult to injury, the Sandinista leader has rubbed the noses of his congressional apologists in the mud by secretly arranging for 60 new Cuban military instructors to arrive in Managua even as the 100 he promised to remove were in the process of leaving. Mr. Ortega seems to have become so confident that he discounted the ability of U.S. intelligence to catch him out in so barefaced a fraud.

Instead of cautiously keeping some distance between himself and the Sandinista regime in order to calm American fears of Soviet interventionism, Mr. Gorbachev personally welcomed Daniel Ortega to Moscow with a reception by the

Kremlin high command and promised continued economic aid to Nicaragua "in an atmosphere of friendship and complete understanding."

As the new leadership in the Kremlin reacts to signs of American vacillation and boldly tests the limits of what the U.S. Congress will tolerate, Reagan officials expect that the Soviets will come up with enough hard currency to keep the Nicaraguan economy afloat.

If this public display of the growing closeness of the Soviet-Sandinista alliance is not enough to persuade the Democratic leadership in the House to reconsider its opposition to all forms of aid to the contras, there is the remarkable series of intelligence windfalls during the last few weeks.

These discoveries have added fresh, hard evidence to the Reagan administration's claim that the Sandinista regime is deeply involved with Cuba in supporting and directing guerrilla activity in both El Salvador and Honduras.

The April 11 defection of a top Communist guerrilla leader to the Salvadoran government and the April 18 capture by the Salvadoran army of a female guerrilla chieftain with a cache of internal documents provide clear proof of the extent to which the Nicaraguan government acts as a support base for the Communist insurgency in El Salvador.

The April 14 capture of seven Nicaraguan agents in Honduras

engaged in smuggling arms shows that country, too, is on the target list, as is Costa Rica.

Under heavy pressure from Nicaragua's three small neighbors to demonstrate that congressional inaction does not signal an American retreat from the region, President Reagan has decided on a sharp response in the form of an executive order calling for an American trade embargo against Nicaragua. This step will satisfy congressional demands that the possibilities of economic sanctions be exhausted before force is invoked.

Realizing that the Soviets will give enough economic aid to the Sandinista regime to cushion the effect of an American embargo, Reagan officials accept the necessity for some type of long-term continuing assistance to the contras to keep the pressure on the Sandinistas for democratic reforms and to help protect the neighboring countries from subversion.

Now that Mr. Gorbachev has so openly aligned himself with the Sandinista regime, the administration expects less opposition from Congress to funding the contras. Rather than risk losing a premature vote with a hastily prepared position, as they did last week, Reagan strategists are determined to take the time to build solid support for a thoroughly considered policy designed to win over moderate Democrats. With his strong ties to the Henry Jackson wing of the

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Democratic party, Elliott Abrams, the newly appointed assistant secretary of state for the region, will be crucial to this effort.

In the meanwhile, there is the danger that the Sandinistas will strike hard with their newly acquired Soviet helicopters and artillery to wipe out the contra resistance before the rainy season closes down the fighting in three weeks.

The best Pentagon estimate is that the Sandinistas have not yet been sufficiently trained in Russian armament and have not brought up enough supplies to risk a major offensive this month.

By the time the rains end, American aid to the contras should begin flowing again.